

**"It Isn't What
a Man
Believes..."**

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"It Isn't What a Man Believes . . ."

THERE is a certain stock character that you have often met in novels and short stories. He has a rough exterior; he expresses himself with a cynicism that shocks his maiden aunts; he is sometimes encountered in the more questionable parts of town; he never darkens the door-step of a church. At the same time he has a heart of gold. If a small boy falls down and cuts his upper lip, or some poor forsaken woman is being given the cold-shoulder treatment by all the churchwomen of the community, or a mortgage is about to be foreclosed, our hero—still uttering cynical aphorisms about man, the walking ape—will be found galloping to the rescue.

I have said that this particular kind of hero is a stock character in fiction; he is more common there than in real life, though I have personally been acquainted with several lovable specimens. I suppose it is the occasional existence of the type which has given

rise to the classic saying, "It isn't what a man believes that counts, but what he does."

Now it would take Socrates at least one full-length dialogue to dive to the bottom of all the implications contained in that one sentence. I can only skim the surface, and to do so I shall start by asking a very simple question: Why does anyone do anything?

The psychologists are ready at hand with varied answers, all of which are probably true as far as they go. For example, we do certain things because we are animals. If we do not eat and drink and breathe, we die; therefore, we will stop at nothing—or almost nothing—to meet these three needs. A man can live without sex, but the desire for it is as basic a desire as the hunger for food and drink. There again, we often stop at nothing—or almost nothing—to get what we want.

But even from the psychologist's viewpoint, we are more than simple animals. We are social beasts. We live in a gregarious, complicated society, and our actions are at least partially determined by what is going along around us. A child brought up in a bankrobber's family will use a revolver to shoot down the cops; the child brought up in a different family will dedicate it to target practice at the country club.

I have been giving only the crudest examples of *why* we do, or strongly tend to do, certain things. But it is obvious that many human actions are determined neither by biology or environment. The racketeer's son who decides to become a poet seems to be responding to a third thing—the unknown quantity in the human equation.

What is this *x*, this unknown quantity? I submit that it is *what a man believes*. Each of us, from the lowliest ditchdigger or politician to the highest whatever-you-wish is a philosopher. In the back of the brain is a mental chart, listing the possible aims of life in a kind of hierarchy; entangled with the system of values is at least a primitive metaphysics, having to do with the nature of life and reality. You can search as long as you wish among the Tobacco Road farmers of Georgia or the teeming Cockneys of London, but you will not find a man or woman who does not have some shadowy and confused philosophy.

HERE we come to the crux. The popular saying, "It isn't what a man believes but what he does, that counts," has a concealed presupposition: "What a man does has no connection with what he believes."

Does a candid observation of human life confirm the

presupposition? In other words, is all thought and philosophy a kind of self-deception or window-dressing which has no practical connection with human actions?

It is a principle of the social sciences that the margin of error can be reduced by observing a large body of people. That being the case, the example of Nazi Germany might be instructive. During the years of Adolf Hitler the German people were speedily and thoroughly indoctrinated with a philosophy radically opposed to the beliefs on which European civilization had rested for fifteen hundred years. The new **Weltanschauung* held that the individual, taken alone, is merely a animal, but that certain breeds of this animal were of more worth than others—rather as the St. Bernard is more highly esteemed than the hound dog. The individuals of one breed, considered collectively, constituted a metaphysical entity called a race, and the purpose of history was for one particular race, the “Aryan,” to liquidate or enslave all others.

Whatever one may think of the Nazi philosophy, it *was* a self-consistent one: the individual is nothing, the race is everything, and some races are intrinsically more valuable than others. The Nazis acted in ac-

* This word is almost untranslatable. The best English equivalent is “world outlook.”

cordance with what they believed. They enslaved the “inferior” races, or else shoved their members into gas chambers; quite logically they used the resulting ashes as fertilizer, and on occasion they expressed their esthetic instincts by making lampshades of human skins. (Who objects to a pocket-book made from the hide of another animal, the cow?)

The Russians also have a philosophy. They believe in a glorious culmination of history, to be brought about by the domination of the proletariat and the liquidation of other classes. They have practised what they preach, as the forced labor camps of Siberia bear witness.

On the other hand, the British—the hypocritical British as the Nazis and the American isolationists loved to call them—also had a philosophy. In theory at least, they have always believed in the moral values of Christianity, if not in its theology. Justice, for example, is a word that brings uneasy twinges to the British conscience. One result is the freedom of India. The British jailed Gandhi repeatedly, but they never shot him, for underneath they could recognize the justice of the demands that he voiced. An occasional trigger-happy British army officer might order his soldiers to fire on a mob, but the British proved in-

capable of anything so systematic and orderly as gas chambers or large-scale labor camps. One wonders how Gandhi would have fared if the Nazis or Communists had been the rulers of India. . . .

THE TRUTH is that what a man believes is one of the most powerful forces in determining what he does. Since the biological and environmental urges are often in conflict (for example, a girl brought up by prim parents but subjected to the normal yearnings of sexual desire), it is philosophy or religion that is likely to cast the deciding vote.

The trite saying—"it isn't what a man believes that counts, but what he does"—could only have arisen in an age when people were trying desperately hard to come to terms with the theory of evolution: trying so hard that they assumed if the grasshopper and ape live by no discernible philosophy, the same must hold true of man. But man, by nature and definition, is a creature that is both a part of the natural world and above it; he is an animal with a certain something inside him which gives him a partial freedom from pure instinct or habit.

G. K. Chesterton once said that if he tried to rent a room, the first thing he would want to know would

be his landlady's theology. In the long run, nothing is so powerful as the ultimate loyalties and values in the mind of the individual man and woman. If I believe that the universe is a haphazard conglomeration of atoms (and I am a small, haphazard segment of the same), I will logically adopt the philosophy of eat, drink, and be merry; or alternatively I will get my satisfaction from the sense of power I derive in pushing other people around. It may be that in certain situations I will be kind and helpful, but this will be because of habits inherited from a civilization that was once based on another philosophy—or because the "natural law" of human relations survives as a buried instinct, and is never completely suppressed by a false philosophy.

On the other hand, if I believe that the final meaning is God; that in Christ the meaning of God has been made plain to the dumbest eyes; that I will live forever—either in the presence of God or in isolation from him—I will be driven to act accordingly, as best I can.

The one justification for the common saying is this: too frequently people fail to make a distinction between what a man *actually* believes, and what he goes through the motions of believing. The hypocrite who

attends church every Sunday and swindles widows and orphans the other six days of the week is not an invention of the Young Atheists' League: I have met examples of him, and so have you. But there is no mystery here. A man can also go through the motions of believing in scholarship—perhaps even convince himself that he is a dedicated scholar—whereas the ideals he really holds have more to do with promotion and pay than scholarship. Self-deception and deception of the public are easy in religion, as in everything else.

The question is really: not what a man goes through the motions of believing, but what he really believes—what he believes so devoutly that he would face ridicule, the torture chamber, or lions in the arena before he would renounce. When put in those terms, there is no ambiguity. What a man believes becomes what he does—and what he is.

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